

DIRECTING GENDER: MALE FEMALE DICHOTOMY (THE GENDER BINARY) IN THE MOVIES OF RENJITH

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Abstract: Malayalam movies from the beginning itself had some strong women characters. The popular films however at the same time had women portrayed as submissive and subjugated. Post liberalisation Malayali women had become more empowered but films still has rarely tried to portray this. Renjith is a popular and critically acclaimed director in contemporary Malayalam cinema. This paper is an attempt to look into the gender construct in the movies of Renjith. Popular reading of women portrayed in his movies is that they are independent in thought and action. A close analysis reveals it is not so. Five movies directed by Renjith is taken and by analysing these movies it is attempted to situate find the female protagonists of these movies fall within a patriarchal discourse defined by the traditional, social, gender sexual identities that characterises the south Indian cinema language.

Key words : Gender construct, male gaze, patriarchy, Renjith

“Men act, women appear. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at.”

(John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*)

Contemporary Malayalam cinema is now in a vibrant and transforming phase. The new wave or new generation cinema tries to portray women characters in a bold way. They portray hitherto unfamiliar back grounds from/in films like *Passenger* to *Trivandrum lodge*. It tempts to question traditional norms of film making, challenges stardom and subverts many constructs. Simultaneously there are also directors who continue with their traditional film making.

Last three to four decades has seen remarkable changes in film making in Malayalam. As cinema is an embodiment of mass culture, film of 1980's had tendencies to portray capitalistic, patriarchal and neo-conservative ideas. It has been commented upon by Braudy and Cohen. As they mention "... because films embody, communicate enforce and suggest meanings". In comparison today's Malayalam cinema is different. "Today's Malayalam cinema attempts to create a pan-malayali identity which revolves around the images of an increasing 'machoistic' and tradition bound' modern hero as played by Mohanlal in *Devasuram* (1993), *Aaram Thampuran* (1997), *Raavanaprabhu* (2001), *Narasimham* (2000); by Mammooty in *Rakshasarakjavu* (2001), *Valiyettan* (2000); Dileep in *Lion* (2006), *Meesamadhavan* (2002) and an increasingly 'feminised' and conforming heroine". (Pillai, 23)

Director Renjith is one of the best directors in South Indian film industry. Multi-faceted, his movies cater the interests of the popular film culture. Renjith's directorial approach is a balancing of mainstream/mass audience films and parallel/aesthetic movies. Presence of superstars, punch dialogues, overdose of violence, rich visual images competing with the television visuals fill his films. Even amidst all these he has proved himself as an intelligent director with his sharp character constructs. Of late his cinema appeals to all classes of audience

This paper is an attempt to look into the gender construct in the movies of Renjith. His characters make us feel that they are independent in thought and action even though they really are not like that. In spite of talking about emancipation struggles and progressive thinking these women constructs adhere to the patriarchal norms laid down by the male protagonists which are necessarily a patriarchal construct. Even though his movies touch ordinary lives, a deeper analysis of his movies would show the male

protagonist construct is different from that of other main stream directors in south Indian movies. Representation of women still in his movies confers to society's positioning of women as in South Indian movie industry. His women characters never love to break the margins laid down by the protagonist characters of his movies. They love to live in the shade and comfort of their male counterpart. The approach of male characters is dominating towards their female counterparts. Hero remains stereotypical in that. Renjith seems to be having a sort of stereotyping syndrome in the projection of women. Right from the time he was writing screen plays (*Devaasuram*, *Rajaputhran*, *Yaadhavam*, *Aaram Thampuraan*) to his directorial ventures (*Black*, *Prajaapati*, *Pranchiyettan and the Saint*, *Thirakkadha*) he has tried to represent dominant and masculine women while maintaining their feminine qualities. He presents the male as hero, villain and genius who must protect the weak and fragile characters.

Many of his movies are set in the ambience of elite Hindu culture semiotics with a tharavadu (court yards of Nalukettu), classical music, temple festivals and feudal background. Thus most of his movies are territorialised movies as they are set in Valluvanadan back ground. In one way he just tries to support the 'malayaliness' found in those backgrounds. His movies are real texts for learning how malayaliness is imagined in Malayalam cinema during the last few decades. His heroes quotes from Sanskrit texts, become cheer leaders for conducting ultsavams (festivals) in temples, have elephants in their front yard, caretakers or assistants (karyasatans) waiting in the front of the house .women returning from bath (ambalakkulam) and temples, paddy fields- and they defines Malayali now. Subsequently it is also noticeable that his movies do not discuss any contemporary political issues. He is claimed to be a very well read director, but is strange that his movies never discuss the contemporary life, society and politics of Kerala; instead they talk about feudal lords, elephant owners living in joint families indulging in their own luxuries. Emerged discourses of Renjith's cinema showcases male patriarchy with women adhering to the rules set. As in other south Indian films "the women are shown in subordinate roles upholding traditional values. They represent the community and are seen as repositories of community values" (Jasbeer and Rai .43). Tales of love and marriage in Renjith's movies centres on chastity, virginity and female worship. Renjith's heroines fulfil cultural expectations of femininity in terms of costume, appearance or they wish to return to it as seen in characters portrayed by Priyaraman in *Aaram Thampuran* and Aishwarya in *Narasimham*.

Male protagonists of his films are very much different from the typical heroes that we see in south Indian cinema. They differ from other heroes in many ways. Tough guys, grim past, seeking vengeance, single unattached man, knowledge in classical language (Sanskrit) and the martial art 'kalaripayattu', patriarchal instinct to protect a helpless girl – all mingles in them. Subsequently all female recurrently negotiate male desire. Ideal feminine is defined alternatively as male companionship. As the result what we see in his movies are minor roles for heroine, subordinated women who upholds traditional values and thus relegated to a passive position. They never try to emasculate or annihilate the male no matter how free they are about all these things. These issues are explored with five films, - all directorial ventures- of Renjith. *Ravanaprabhu* (2001), *Nandanam* (2002), *Chandrolsavam* (2005), *Rock'N'Roll* (2007) & *Spirit* (2012). By analysing these movies we attempt to situate them within a patriarchal discourse defined by the traditional, social, gender sexual identities that characterises the south Indian cinema language. The study uses textual analysis as a basic methodology. As Stephen Heath says this "is the will to treat film as texts and units of discourse". For Jacques Derrida "textual analysis involves the practise of deconstruction, a process of 'unpacking' texts to reveal the unspoken premises while being alert to the discursive heterogeneity".

Ravanaprabhu (2001) was the sequel of one of his successful screenplay written earlier in 1993, *Devasuram*. Mangalassery Kaarthikeyan, son of the feudal lord Managalassery Neelakantan is the hero. It had all the ingredients of a popular Malayalam cinema. Jaanaki the heroine is presented as a free and liberated woman who can think and argue on her own. Her dialogues and stance illustrates that. She ultimately falls for the masculinity of the play boy hero. Power seems to obscure her vision and she falls for his antiques. Renjith invests in the tension created between characters that constantly remind each other of hero's presence. Jaanaki feels that he is the strong and powerful one who can take care of her and subjugation happens. She adheres to those norms that we easily take for granted; a conventional heroine has been created in contrast to the hero construct. Patriarchal structures confine her to that space and gender segregation remains a norm. Laura Mulvey states "the division between viewing object and viewed object assumes masculine and feminine possessions: a dichotomy of man as active bearer and women as passive object of the look constitutes basis of a patriarchal film form. Around the axis of this dominant dichotomy

interaction between textual production and film spectatorship generates sexual difference in accordance with a patriarchal unconscious”.

In *Nandanam* (2002), Manu is a Bangalore returned good-looking well educated English speaking protagonist who does not carry any of the western stereotyping. He is going to fall for the pure pristine, simple home maid Balaamani brought to look after his grandmother Unniamma. Balaamani is an innocent dove who has her own fantasies and falls in love with this upper class boy. She is an orphan, helpless, but an ardent devotee of lord Krishna, who daily lights her lamp before the image of God and calls His name often for everything. She is essentially how a Malayalee rural girl should be. She is taught and trained and also the viewer is reminded of how a girl should behave and move around or else how she becomes vulnerable. Balaamani becomes a model to girls who are essentially mothers and wives. The obsession with the notion of chastity as it recurs in all his movies is illustrated in Balaamani. She adheres to that and she is rewarded with a US bound husband. The intervention of the divine in the life of Manu and Balaamani is also to be noted. It may be because of our subconscious resistance to the notion of someone in a lower class marrying an upper class person.

The back ground of cultural ideology which supports patriarchy works behind such types of notional constructs. “within the patriarchal culture women stands as a signifier for the male other bound, by a symbolic order in which men can leave out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imparting them as the silent image of women still tied to her place as a learner and not maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 59)

The male protagonist in *Chandroltsavam* (2005) is a globe trotter who comes back to his home after a long wandering with some mystery behind him. He is a loner. He has travelled a lot, has lot of experience behind him. A scholar, philosopher and poet, Sreehari talks a lot on spirituality. Even though the title and theme suggests the celebration of the protagonist life, it ultimately becomes the story of winning a lady, the heroine. Indulekha was the reason for his exile and on his return, he finds her in a queer situation from which he has to rescue her. Here the female protagonist is the one who undergoes many trials for no fault of her. Indulekha is married to one of the friends of Sreehari, but he is disabled by the villain who wants to marry her. It happens on the first day of her marriage itself as she has to be kept virgin for the hero to win her ultimately. She remains a devoted wife, even after her husband is disabled. She suppresses all her dreams and remains a pativrita then everything goes in a typical filmy way. The binary here goes in another line too. As Teresa De Lauretis claims “gender is both product and process of cinema’s representation and self representation.” The hero has returned home to retain and enjoy his life to the utmost. He has an unending yearning for his life while the lady in the film is the one who subdues to the life she has got. It becomes an instance to reiterate the feudalistic structure. Here Renjith’s view is deterministic and normative revolving around the heroine’s physical attraction and the attempts to win her.

Rock’N Roll (2007) as the name suggests is a film on the background of south Indian cinema music industry. Film is set in an urban background. Rajamouli is a globetrotter percussionist. He is introduced in a shot where he shares space with women in a club. He drinks, womanises and belongs to the pub culture. Has affairs with many women, knows many languages and has performed with many artists all around the world. But even then he is single as he is waiting for a woman who can earn him. A very unconventional hero he is. He was with many women who really wanted to marry him. But he won’t accept any of them as they don’t adhere to the traditional women concept. So where does he find his heroine. In comes Daya Sreenivasan, simple, lovable, beautiful, fair, first time singer who doesn’t know the ways of the world. She is also a helpless one caught in family trappings. The lady finally accepts him on her day of marriage. Even after his bad reputation, she is not bothered about all these. The politics here is that the lady love should be a virgin whereas the male need not be always good in his ethics and values, a very patriarchal way of looking into things. Even though Daya offends Vivek Menon, her fiancée, nothing of the sort of female empowerment happens here.

Spirit (2012) is more a psychological treatment of the same gender notions. The movie basically revolves around alcoholism but also satirically comments on many issues of contemporary Kerala society. On the outset it seems to be a movie of enlightened man and women who has different opinions of their life and marriage. Raghunandan and Meera get separated as they can’t go along together, but after their divorce the lady needs someone to cling on. It has been beautifully justified by the protagonist remarking

that 'I felt he is the one more suitable for you.' Raghunandan could easily mingle with Meera and her new husband Alexey, go there, share a drink with him and be happy. She is troubled to hear about the disease of her new husband. She leans for a support from a man, and she gets that from her ex-husband. Meera is put into a forged version of equality. Man can survive on his own but for a women she needs someone to support her.

Renjith is reckoned as a sensible film maker who caters to the finer sensibilities of Malayalee audience. But still it seems that even amidst his attempt on bringing in change, he seems to reconstruct patriarchal dominance in Malayalam cinema. Renjith uniquely crafts his cinema to give male dominant voice and perspective in a way that resonates with male audience. He provides his male viewers the milieu in which they could identify themselves as being a part of all that is dominant. Feminine notions are infused and forced upon into his powerful women characters. There is a visible hurry to get back and re-emphasize their own roles as wives, mothers and daughters in law. Renjith is the writer and director who created male characters known for their physical/oral language –stiff walk, vulgar language (double meaning) rough gestures. But women's roles in his film even though dominant and masculine, maintains feminine qualities. As Meena T. Pillai quotes "that Malayalam cinema has sought and continues to propagate the common myth of women's subjection and sacrifice is probably one of the reasons for its popularity and mass appeal".(23)

An evaluation of the gender of the films of Renjith directed from 2001 to 2012 shows that they do not shift in perspective as Germaine Greer puts " nothing has really changed" (Greer). Renjith becomes a Director of gender binary and it is justified that cinema is a system of fabrications and constructions rather than mere reflections. The notion of patriarchy is affirmed.

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